

Media Panel discusses 'Media on the Battlefield' with Class of 2006

Story and photos
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As the wheels of tanks, humvees and trucks plowed across the sands of Iraq at the start of the second gulf war in March, 2003, television viewers were given the sense that they were riding along with them because of the embedded journalists filming the invasion, evidence that the roles of the military and journalists are becoming more intertwined.

First class cadets got a chance to hear from four journalists, who put themselves on the battlefield, discuss how those roles are being played out and what they should expect from the media in the field during a panel discussion March 23 in Robinson Auditorium.

Titled "Media on the Battlefield," The Department of Military Instruction sponsored-event brought in Jane Arraf, former CNN Baghdad bureau chief and senior Baghdad correspondent; Josh Rushing, a host for Al Jazeera International; Greg Palkot, a foreign correspondent for Fox News Channel based in London; and Kevin Sites, a renowned war correspondent who is currently the first news correspondent for Yahoo! News, to engage in conversation with cadets on what they do.

"I felt that this was such a great opportunity to talk to young military leaders, second lieutenants just about to be commissioned, that are going to have a huge impact on how things are covered," Sites said. "In fact, I thought at some point I am probably going to be embedding with one of these platoons that these young officers are going to be leading, so I wanted



Jane Arraf explains her video presentation to the cadets.

them to be as aware as possible on what my role was going to be in working with them."

For Sites, who has covered global war all across the world for several national networks, he found this opportunity incredibly important, realizing that the military and media had reached a crossroads.

"We don't understand each other very well," Sites said. "The military has done a very good job in instructing us at what they do and who they are, but we have not done a good job in teaching you who we are and what our role in society is."

Right now, according to Sites, there is a lot of misunderstanding, skepticism and distrust between the media and military.

"Some of that skepticism is healthy," Sites said, realizing that some people do their jobs well and others don't. "So until you prove yourself to me as an officer and until I prove myself to you as a good reporter we should have some healthy skepticism, but even before that we've got to get past the misunderstanding of what our roles are."

While it is the military's role to carry out the mission and policies the government asks of them, explained Sites, it is the role of

the journalist to report not only on how they are doing it, but to serve as a sort of watch dog, making sure that the war or mission is being prosecuted within the legal boundaries the military is required to do it in.

"I think in times of war people do the most incredible things and the most horrific things," Sites said. "It is the job of the journalist to be there to make sure that this society that sent you to war takes full responsibility of what they are asking you to do."

"Although you bear this burden on a personal level, it is society's responsibility because we sent you there, and in sending you there we have to make sure that it is not just the heroic things, but it is the things that are going to give you nightmares that this society needs to understand. It is not good enough for them to say to you when you come back, 'Good job! Thanks for protecting us and fighting for freedom,' when they don't have the details, when they don't know what you had to do both good and bad, and I think that is a critical role for us."

After an hour of discussion and asking questions to Sites, Arraf, Rushing and Palkot, some cadets still had feelings of skepticism.

"It just confirmed my suspicions," said Cadet 1st Class James Blackburn, who was aghast that even though the reporters know of the good things going on they choose deliberately to show more of the negative aspects of war.

"It is a paradox that you have one reporter that knows we are doing the good things, the rebuilding and all that, yet the American people for the most part have no idea," Blackburn said. "...it is all about money and I guess bombs going off are what makes money instead of rebuilding schools."

Other cadets came away with a more positive response to the media panel.

"I think it is good that they came here," said Cadet 1st Class Amanda King. "I think it is important for us to actually talk to the media and to hear from their perspective of things before we get over there because they are not going away and it is important for us to interact with them in a good manner."

King realized that while she might not always agree with the choices of the editors and those in the higher levels of corporate media, that what she sometimes finds to be biased or partisan in media is not necessarily because of the reporters.



Kevin Sites, (right), talks to cadets in Grant Hall.



Panelists Jane Arraf and John Rushing listen to Greg Palkot.

"I think they really do mean it when they say they are just trying to objectively report the truth and are just trying to do a job and that they think what they are doing is supporting the war efforts in the same way that we are," King said. "It really struck me that they were more genuine than what I thought they were going to be."

The purpose of the media panel, explained Sites, is not to teach officers to do their job better, but, in a sense, train them to be democratic Soldiers who do not operate in a vacuum.

"So I am not an annoyance. I am

an integral part of the institutions that make up your country," Sites said. "You may not like the specific corporations that fund them, you may not like the material that comes out of them, but the concept of a free press, the concept of a democracy that can't survive without an independent press is sacrosanct. It is the same thing as if I might not like every general that I meet or every colonel that I meet, but with the institution of the military you respect the overall goal of what they are there to do. That same kind of respect has to be acknowledged."



John Rushing talks to cadets and officers.



Greg Palkot listens to a cadet question at Grant Hall.